Interview with Joseph C. Walsh

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JOSEPH C. WALSH

Interviewed by: G. Lewis Schmidt

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Bio-Sketch: Joseph C. Walsh

Q: This is Lew Schmidt interviewing Joe Walsh at his home in Bethesda, Maryland on April 25, 1989. Joe, I'm going to ask you to spend a few minutes giving us a little bit of your background, what your education was, what you did—not necessarily much of what you did before you came into the Agency, but anything that you think is pertinent, and then give us a brief synopsis of how it was that you got started with USIA. And from that point we'll pick up your various assignments with the Agency in sequence. If I want to stop you, I'll raise my finger—you can stop and I'll ask a question. Otherwise, you just keep on talking. So if you'll pick it up there and go ahead.

WALSH: Very well, Lew. I graduated college in 1933, in the depths of the so-called Great Depression. I chose to pursue a career in social-work and, after obtaining an M.A. degree I attended courses in Fordham School of Social Service and thereafter went to work for the New York City Welfare Department. Then, in '37 I joined the American Red Cross assisting in their flood-relief program in Kentucky and Ohio. On the completion of that work I went with the New York Prison Association attending to parolees and prison problems.

Therefore, I was employed by the New York Legal Aid Society as a social-worker and general administrator of their Criminal Court Branch. In 1941, I was sworn in as a Special Agent of the FBI. My eleven year career in the Bureau included postings in Little Rock, Arkansas, Houston and Galveston, Texas, and, finally, in New York City wherein my work was almost wholly involved with the doings of Soviet espionage.

Entry into USIA: 1953

In 1953 the U.S. Information Agency came to being. I got a phone call from an old FBI colleague, Charles M. Noone, who had accepted the position in the new Agency as Chief of their Security Office. He wanted me to head up the New York City office, where, at that time, most of the Agency's operations were located; I accepted the offer and in September '53 began a twenty-year association with USIA.

In '54, all of the New York elements were moved to Washington. In '56 Charlie Noone, the first head of the Security Office, resigned his position to return to the practice of law. I was named his successor. Three years later, under the solid influences of George Allen, then Director of the Agency, I left my job in the Security Office to accept an assignment as Executive Officer of USIA, Mexico.

Q: Before you go on to your foreign service career, were there any particular notable situations or cases with regard to security that you would like to or feel you can talk about — any particular cases or problems that came up while you were Director?

Problems Caused by Excessive Security Requirements Aggravated byMcCarthy Period of 1950's

WALSH: There were multiple problems. When Congress created USIA they directed that everyone then in the Agency be cleared for Top-Secret information. Thus, all were subjected to “full-field” investigations by the FBI to determine whether or not their employment was to be continued. Also, all applicants for employment with the Agency

were subject to the same regulation. This investigational processing consumed long periods of time—as much as four months in some cases—which created untenable problems in the hiring procedures. As a result of these long delays, the Agency lost many especially suitable applicants for employment.

The great bulk of the job didn't set well with the FBI and, with Congressional approval, transferred the full-field investigations to the Civil Service Commission with the stipulation that should an investigation reveal affiliation with Communism or its organizations, such would be returned to the FBI for their more extensive handling. This measure reduced considerably the waiting time before the required clearance could be made for an individual's appointment.

The “clearance” process, of course, fell upon the Office of Security. The staff received the FBI and/or Civil Service reports, studied them carefully and, with no obstacles extant, stamped them with full clearance.

The standard of measurement, our bible, was Executive Order 10450 issued by President Eisenhower shortly before our Agency was formed in 1953. The essence of this Order related to Federal employees as affecting the country's National Security—denial of such employment was spelled out to include anyone associated with communism, homosexuals, drunks and other social aberrants who might be considered threats to the security of the USA.

All this, I'm sure you remember, happened within the days of the broiling McCarthy investigations so thoroughly exposed under TV lights and avidly consumed by a national audience intrigued and scared by the Wisconsin Senator's accusations.

As to the denials of the security clearances: It seems to be—now, thirty-plus years later—there were, within our Agency, extremely few individuals (employees or applicants) who were denied security clearance due to their association with communism, or

its organizations. By far, the major share of the total number were those admitted homosexuals.

It was a nasty business—seeking out and identifying people suspected of homosexuality. A disquieting feature to me—there were several awfully decent and intelligent people who worked within the Agency whom I got to know well and enjoyed working within the Agency programs who, suddenly and peremptorily, dropped out of the picture—disappeared! Under investigation, they had admitted their homosexuality and had resigned.

Perhaps the overwhelming problem of the Office of Security in those days—and, I presume, continues to this day—was the care, storage and protection of classified documents. An unfortunate feature of the Executive Order ruling these processes was the overly simplified allowance permitting the classification of a document by any employee who may have originated that same document.

Overclassification of Government Documents

The classifications were Confidential, Secret or Top-Secret. As I remember: Top-Secret classification was required if the document contained information which in the hands of the enemy might cause war (of course, back in the '50s we weren't at war, nor were there any nations so specified as enemies). Then the other two classifications, Secret and Confidential, were to be used on documents which carried similar information though of less import.

Enormous numbers of documents were improperly classified, all of which, nonetheless, had to be carefully safe-guarded and ceaselessly accounted for.

Particularly I remember one office head who, despite careful admonition even by the Agency's Director, insisted that any document (memos or whatever) which were to leave his office must bear the stamp of Secret. Obviously, some Agency officers felt a classification stamp added a certain important cachet to their product.

Thereafter there developed multiple measures to attempt correction of this enormously growing weight of documents bearing security classifications. None, at least in my time, proved worthwhile.[Break in tape]

Q: When we turned off the tape recorder you were concluding your discussion of how absurd this over-classification problem became. I think you'd come to the end of that particular discussion. Do you have any further comments now about the security situation which prevailed at the time you were heading up the security for the Agency?

WALSH: Another important adjunct to this was the handling and protection of these pieces of paper which had accumulated into enormous quantity across the world. According to carefully spelled-out Security Regulations, all this material had to be stored in approved containers—bar-lock cabinets, combination-type safes, etc., etc. Then, in order to enforce the rigid requirements, violations would be cited and recorded against the employee's record.

In an official inspection trip to Tokyo, I was somewhat taken aback at the exceedingly cold, even rude, reception by the PAO's secretary—Joe Evans was PAO then. I asked him why his secretary was so obviously unhappy. His quick response was, “Don't you know? You've just ordered her back to the States because of her persistent citations of security violations.” Well. I didn't know; even though my name endorsed the order. There had been just too many. Of course, the lady was very unhappy leaving Tokyo but, here again was another single reference to the complexities of an absurd situation in a tight protection system of stuff which, in large measure, never should have been afforded any protection.

I presume—I certainly hope, that additional corrections have been made over the intervening years regarding those patently absurd security measures. Obviously the principal values of that system fell to the great profits gained by the manufacturers of those safe containers.

Then, of course, another upsetting irritation of major proportions was the Cohn/Schine wrecking trip through the USIS operations of Europe and the ensuing McCarthy accusations that the Voice of America housed many communists.

There were several staffers in VOA who did much in the support of Senator McCarthy's mission. One group, of small dimension, called themselves “The Loyal American Underground.” One of its more prominent members was the head of the Russian Service, Alexander Barmine, the old former Soviet General.

Persons and Groups within VOA Making ExaggeratedAccusations against Co-Workers

WALSH: Within a few days of my arrival on the job in the Security Office in New York, Alex Barmine came to see me. He impressed me with the importance of his job and heatedly complained that if Joe Stalin had the power to appoint the VOA Policy Officer he would indeed have selected George Mann!—the current Policy Officer at that time. I passed this information to my boss, Charlie Noone who, after consultation with the Director Ted Streibert, told me that Barmine had made several similar protests to other officers. Each time he was admonished that Mann, the VOA Policy Officer, was doing the job he was directed to do and doing it well. Finally, he, Barmine, was to quit these tactics once and for all. In those days, if you remember, the Voice's policy was to avoid impassioned, belligerent attitudes, which policy did not sit well with the old Russian General. Fortunately, he got back in line for he was an important officer on the Russian Desk of the Voice.

Among the other dissidents there was an employee on the VOA's Romanian Desk, if my memory serves, named Paul Deac. He offered his assistance to the McCarthy staff claiming that he was an official of a large group of European emigres based in Chicago. Apparently he did forge some connections with the Senator's staff and thereafter flaunted a memo pad with the printed legend, “From the Desk of Sen. Joe McCarthy.” Such, as you might imagine, created quite a disturbance among his colleagues, many of whom had

clear and vivid memories of their own experiences in the days of Hitler's domination and feared some sort of continuance of such evil might be developing about them.

One of them came to my office one day; he wanted advice. He had received one of the memos with the legend “From the Desk of Sen. Joe McCarthy” ordering him to report to a certain suite in the Waldorf-Astoria Towers on a specified date. (The Waldorf suite, I later learned, was leased by the Schine family.) I told the man the paper had no weight in legitimacy, that it was not a subpoena and that he could ignore it, or respond to it—whichever was his decision. He was very much relieved and, I learned sometime later, he happily passed my comments to other colleagues who had received similar orders from the McCarthy staff.

Months later, I lunched with an old friend who, at that time, was legal assistant of the McCarthy staff. He told me the Senator had learned of my advice to the VOA staffers, that he was quite upset and promised that I'd be relieved of my job. Well, fortunately, things didn't work out that way.

Assignment as Executive Officer, Mexico

Q: Well, Joe, if you think you've pretty well covered what you wanted to say about your security experiences, we'll go on to your overseas experience. I guess Mexico was your first overseas assignment.

WALSH: Yes, as I mentioned before, George Allen persisted in expressing his doctrine that the Agency's work lay abroad, that the Washington staff existed only to see that the overseas staffs were properly and adequately supported and, more personally, he recommended strongly that his own staff officers seek assignments overseas. I was not happy with my occupation in Security, made my feelings known to George Allen and he enthusiastically recommended me for a foreign service assignment. Mexico was it. After several weeks of Spanish-language classes in FSI in March '59, I became Exec. Officer

there. Jack McDermott was PAO; throughout his tenure, according to several colleagues, he was convinced I was a CIA agent.

In passing, it may be of interest: when I was appointed Chief of the Office of Security Ted Streibert, then Agency Director, carefully instructed me that under no circumstances was the Agency to be used as a cover for any CIA personnel; he was convinced if such occurred its exposure would do irreparable damage to the mission of the Agency. To emphasize the gravity of his instructions, he warned that should a CIA type, by whatever method, get into the Agency, he'd made certain that I'd be fired.

As you might expect, throughout my tenure in Security I was diligently careful making certain Streibert's directions were meticulously obeyed. Several years later, during my JUSPAO/Saigon tour, I was amazed and astounded to learn that at least one of my colleagues there was, in fact, a CIA operative working under the guise of a JUSPAO newsman.

1963: Assignment to ARA/Public Affairs Office, State Department

In '63, I was appointed PAO, USIS, El Salvador. This posting, unfortunately, was of short duration. A severe injury sustained by my son in an auto accident while a student in college necessitated my transfer to Washington. In the Latin American Area, I worked in various capacities as liaison with State's American Republics Area and spent most of two years in State's ARA/Public Affairs Office. While there, Sherwin P. Helms and I created a daily newspaper titled ARA/PAF NEWS which was composed of the most important news stories about Latin America as they appeared in principal newspapers here in the U.S. The paper, I've been told, achieved great success throughout the Area and, when last checked, was still a sought-after publication.

Executive Officer, JUSPAO—Vietnam; 1967

Q: What years were you in Vietnam?

WALSH: I got there in August of '67. The infamous Tet Offensive happened a few months later, in the early days of 1968. And, perhaps of greater destruction, our JUSPAO headquarters were burned out the following August. Some correspondents, of which the town was full, pursued a concept that JUSPAO had been wrecked by enemy action. Such was not the case. The destructive fire was caused by badly installed electric circuitry along the ceilings of the ground floor.

Our office space was under a Vietnamese lease; the landlord initiated legal action insisting that the fire was caused by defective and unauthorized electric circuitry throughout the ground floor of that building and demanded all damages be repaired by JUSPAO. In Saigon those days, under contract with the U.S. Armed Forces, there were several very big U.S.-based construction companies. I sought their help but the costs they cited were way out of reach. Thus, I had to deal with local Vietnamese contractors whose work was agonizingly slow and badly done. Meanwhile, especially with the greatly-appreciated “loan” of office furnishings from AID's Saigon/Supply Depot, we succeeded in locating and furnishing office space, albeit in several locations, with headquarters in the old bombed-out former U.S. Embassy down by the river.

Executive Officer, Bonn: 1969—Followed by Retirement

I remained in Vietnam until April '69 and, after some home leave, reported to USIS/Bonn, West Germany as Executive Officer. Shortly after the completion of the Bonn tour I retired in early '73—thus completing twenty years service with the U.S. Information Agency, plus eleven with the FBI, totaling thirty-one years in the service of our government.

Q: Well, I've got you beaten by one year. I had some difficulties with Mr. Shakespeare. He and I decided we had no mutual respect and I retired in November of 1972. Do you have any comments to make about your total career in the Agency and how you feel about it or how you feel about the Agency in general? Or do you have any anecdotes that you would like to add before we conclude this?

Praise for Exchange of Persons Program

WALSH: For so many reasons, all essentially personal, I am beholden to the USIA for such as the friendships and associations with so many good and noble and hugely talented people from which I and my family have so greatly profited throughout my years with the Agency.

I've been away too long to offer any kind of a valid estimate of the Agency's current doings, but there is one program—enormously important in my view!—which seems to have been sustained through the years, viz: exchange of persons programs. It goes all the way back to the solid policy concept depicted in that great agency exhibit “The Family of Man.” I'm sure you remember, Lew, and then the “People-to-People” programs supporting the same concept and, of course, the on-going exchange of persons programs down through the years. I read recently of an “au-pair” program fostered by USIA which I think is a great idea. The Agency's very purpose of existence directs its aims towards international understanding. This method is certainly a sure way of accomplishing that end.

As for anecdotes: At an Agency Christmas party, back towards the end of the 50's, a wife of one of the Agency's officers remarked to my wife, “Isn't it lovely? Every Christmas we have a new Director!” Her view wasn't precisely on the mark, but she wasn't far off. There had been a steady parade of political designees to head up the young USIA who through their careers brought varying degrees of prominence and success to the Agency; one I'm sure you remember, Lew, made a speech in Hawaii in which he referred to “alien influences” of USIA, which generated great concern among some of the Senate's leadership—so much so that, short of being wiped out of existence, our budget was heavily cut—but we survived.

Q: There are a lot of anecdotes being picked up. I don't know what use, ultimately, will be made of them. But it's been my feeling that if you have anything to say that is an anecdote, even if it's only peripherally concerned with USIA but relates to your foreign service

experience, or if you have some feeling, not a grudge, that you feel you can document about the wrong turn, or the wrong policy, that some officer followed, I'm not adverse to having it put in. I think that it ought to be there because if the people who are being interviewed now don't tell it, it will die without ever being recorded. I think we can always edit it out if we think it too critical or unfairly stated.

Criticism of Country Plan System

WALSH: Another topic I'd like to touch on, i.e., the Country Plan—and I wonder if USIS posts still go through that exercise which, at least in my years, was generally a repetitive expression of previous plans, generally stale and generally useless. I'd hope better plans have emerged from too many years of the so-called Country Plan misuse.

Q: Well, I'm not sure it ever can be. After my disagreement with Mr. Shakespeare and when I came back to the agency, since he didn't want to give me any particular job, Henry Loomis set up what he called a resource-analysis staff. The first job he gave me was to develop a real effective program for our country's plan. I went through about 30 drafts on that thing and I came to the conclusion that it was nothing but something that contributes to a lot of work on the part of the Post. And, like you, I doubt seriously that it has a lasting value. The only value it has is it does force somebody to sit down and think about what it is you're trying to do. And a lot of people simply ran by the seat of their pants. If it has any value at all it is to force you to think what you are really trying to do instead of just getting on your horse and riding rapidly in all directions. Otherwise, I think it's difficult, if not impossible, because we're dealing with a very volatile thing.

Well, if that's it, Joe, I want to thank you very much for your time and I'm glad we've had this interview. It's the only one we have on the Security side of the program. And there's so many people who don't know what we went through in the early '50s in this program, it's very valuable to have on the record. Thank you, very much.

End of Interview

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